

Mayor's Annual Message, January 8, 2003, Rye City Hall

The Mayor's Annual Message delivered by Rye Mayor Steve Otis at the January 8th meeting of the Rye City Council.

Welcome to City Hall and our first City Council meeting of the New Year. It is my honor to deliver the Mayor's Annual Message for 2003. I believe the beginning of this year is a time for needed reflection, a time to assess the choices before us.

We stand at the intersection of two roads, one path leading to continued progress through cooperation, the other route marked by discord and failure. Rye's past accomplishments have been made possible because we have been a community that has worked together, supported each other, and endeavored to make the success of each project or organization a community goal. We have not been a community saddled with the limitations of partisanship, rancor, or division.

The successes of 2002 provide a guide for the course we must choose in the new year. The achievements of the last twelve months will be remembered long after the arguments and failures are forgotten. Every success was built by working together, supporting each other, cooperating to make progress possible.

We began the year with the innovative work of the Special Fields Committee which brought together recreation, environmental, and neighborhood groups to design the site plans for Disbrow Park and Rye Nursery.

This was followed by the passage of the \$4.4 million Recreation Bond Issue where parents, children, and senior citizens all came together to support the program developed over four years by the Recreation Commission and the Recreation Department in the Recreation Master Plan. The bond issue will benefit the entire community; furthermore this initiative represents the largest single investment in youth programs in the history of our municipal government!

How did we do it? By working together, supporting each other, and cooperating to make progress possible.

Through the initiative of the Police Department, the Department of Public Works, and the City Engineer, we were able to reopen and modernize our long closed police department firing range at an affordable price. This necessary public safety training facility means that both our officers and residents will benefit from the proper training required of our police officers.

How did we do it? The collaboration of City Departments was phenomenal. They did it by working together, supporting each other, and cooperating to make progress possible.

Our City Comptroller is annually recognized for the quality of the financial documents produced for the City. Rye's prized Aaa bond rating has again been reaffirmed by Moody's. We remain in a strong financial position.

Our Traffic and Transportation Committee continued its outstanding record of finding solutions to resident traffic safety complaints and working with the City staff to quickly implement needed changes. Our City and our Police Department are annually recognized by receiving traffic safety awards.

Our newly formed Playland Advisory Committee has met with County officials and is developing expertise to protect Rye's interests at Playland. They will participate in the County's Playland Master Plan study process. They bring energy and enthusiasm to this important task.

How did we do it? By working together, supporting each other, and cooperating to make progress possible.

At Rye Town Park the Pavilions are being completely restored at a cost of between \$500,000 and \$600,000 through a partnership with Seaside Johnnies. This needed restoration will be completed at no cost to the taxpayer, thanks to Seaside Johnnies and the cooperation of the Rye City Council, the Rye Town Park Commission, and the Town of Rye. The Friends of Rye Town Park are ready to proceed with the Duck Pond Project funded mostly through a \$495,000 state grant from the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Governor Pataki has shown great interest and support for our open space parkland projects in Rye. His administration's environmental agencies made the Rye Nursery, Friends Meeting House, and Beaver Swamp Brook acquisitions possible through a no-interest state loan. The Governor's visit to Rye this past spring brought the announcement of grant funding towards the Friends Meeting House acquisition and the honor of his visit to our town.

In December the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation awarded Rye \$1.6 million for our Long Island Sound wetland restoration project at Rye Nursery. The Wildlife Conservation Society is also a partner in this project contributing over \$270,000 in services. Rye appreciates the fact that the Governor and his environmental agencies have recognized our important parkland purchases with targeted funding support.

Assemblyman Tocci has also secured funding for Rye towards our land acquisition projects. Congresswoman Lowey has continued to bring significant funding to our joint Beaver Swamp Brook Restoration Project with Harrison. We continue to work closely with our neighbors across the brook on careful implementation of that project, part of our Open Space and Project Impact initiatives.

Partnerships, outside funding, and grants are all necessary to make these projects possible while limiting the cost to Rye taxpayers. Again, whether inside Rye or with other levels of government, the key to success is working together, supporting each other and cooperating to make progress possible.

Along those lines I will ask the City Council to authorize a volunteer committee of residents experienced in grant writing, historic preservation, and fundraising to take on the task of planning and financing the restoration of the Friends Meeting House. I believe we should attempt to fund this project privately, and towards that end the City Council unanimously eliminated \$40,000 in City funds towards this project from the 2003 budget.

We have the expertise in the community, and it is my hope that this committee should consider establishing a 501(c)3 not-for-profit to accomplish this task. Ultimately, the City has the responsibility for the restoration of the building. A private partnership is the best route to accomplish this task.

Our City Departments have developed a multiple use plan for the Friends property. The approach described in that plan was well thought out and should be supported.

Our Milton Fire Station was reopened on budget this past fall. The design was the result of cooperation between the Board of Wardens, the Professional firefighters, and the City Engineer. More recently, our volunteer firefighters and our professional firefighters worked together on the staffing level issues in our recently adopted City budget.

How did we do it? By working together, supporting each other, and cooperating to make progress possible.

Architects, members of our Board of Architectural Review, members of our Zoning Board of Appeals, and other interested residents have been working on refining a proposal to address the house size to lot size issue. With the assistance of the City Planner and the Building Inspector they have been meeting regularly, often on a weekly basis, to develop a cautious set of changes to our code that will address the excesses, and only the excesses, of the house size to lot size problem.

They have been careful to focus the draft changes to our zoning code so that the vast majority of additions or tear-downs would not be hindered by closing the existing loopholes in our law. The subcommittee continues to test their model against case studies of actual homes and adjust their proposals to meet the cautious and conservative approach we seek. The dedication and intellectual energy of these volunteers has been exceptional. We await their report, more input from the public, and consideration by the City Council.

The Rye Merchant's Association has worked closely with the City, the Recreation Department, and other groups on beautification, street closing events, and scholarships. Their collaboration with others in every project is a major factor in the vitality of our Central Business District.

Our Boat Basin and Golf Club continue to improve, invest in infrastructure, and meet the needs of their members and the community.

In 2002 we established the Rye Senior Advocacy Committee which is providing information, assistance, and referrals to senior citizens. The Committee has created a comprehensive resource directory to make important information more readily accessible.

After three years of work by our City Assessor and Corporation Counsels, the City of Rye won tax relief for City of Rye residents living in the Rye Neck School District. While the Town of Rye has now signaled that they will appeal this ruling, our victory at the NYS Office of Real Property Services was the first legal acknowledgement of the tax inequity shouldered by our residents. We will continue to protect our taxpayers.

I would like to use this opportunity to again thank Julia Novak for her work as City Manager for the past 2 1/2 years. Julia has been dedicated, hard working, and energetic in carrying out her duties as City Manager. Rye is a busy community with a high level of activity. Julia has juggled many challenges along the way. For the entire City I want to thank Julia for her service.

Rye continues to benefit from the infinite hours of volunteer time our residents devote to the City government, not-for-profits, recreation, youth, and cultural activities. We thrive as a community because of the countless activities, causes, and projects that bring us together.

These are just some of the successes from 2002. They all follow a pattern: no politics, no partisanship, just the people of Rye working together, supporting each other and cooperating to make progress possible.

We look forward in 2003 to completion of athletic fields, upgrade of our sewer infrastructure, new traffic safety improvements, creation of dedicated senior citizen space at Rye Rec, and continued progress on the many activities of the City.

For guidance as to what path we should take for 2003 let me share with you tonight quotes from two Republican Presidents whose words are relevant for us today.

When the first President George Bush was sworn into office in 1989 he reached out across the political aisle to Congress and spoke of the importance of working together and of the higher calling needed to get the business of the nation done. He stated, "The American people await action. They didn't send us here to bicker. They ask us to rise above the merely partisan. 'In crucial things, unity' and this, my friends is crucial."

These words have special meaning for us here in Rye because we are faced with a choice. At any level of government, when the partisan becomes everything, failure follows. We succeed when we support each other, work together, and act on the merits. This has certainly been the history of Rye. There is really only one choice for success, to end the partisan preoccupations that set our community back.

We should also be guided by the words of another President, Dwight Eisenhower, who offered wise advice many years ago when he warned, "Don't make your mistakes too quickly." The genius of this advice, for elected officials or any individuals in positions of responsibility, is two-fold. It appropriately reminds us of the humility with which we should approach all responsibilities, and it expresses a needed word of caution regarding the decisions we make.

Rye is a great community where people are eager to settle, stay, raise their children, and call home. We didn't become an exceptional community overnight. It took generations of careful planning, thoughtful design, and cautious growth and evolution. It took people working together to nurture the growth of our institutions like our schools, not-for-profits, and service organizations. Our predecessors thoughtfully developed the services for which residents asked and for which newcomers moved here.

Change is inevitable and there is always room for improvement, but in a community that has so many assets, change must be carefully planned, thoughtfully designed, and cautiously implemented. To do otherwise is to put at risk what is special about our town.

Last January I asked for unity. Today I repeat the call that we be guided by the same principles and perspective. "Our values, how we treat others, our sense of community, friendship, caring, unity of purpose, civility, cooperation, and neighborhood; these are the things that mark the history of our community..... Perspective, graciousness, values, these are the ways our community must distinguish itself."

I again ask the City Council and the community to follow the lead of these values, to follow the only principles by which our success can be based. Earlier I indicated we had a choice, but really there is no choice at all. Let us follow the principles that move our community forward. Let us do it together.